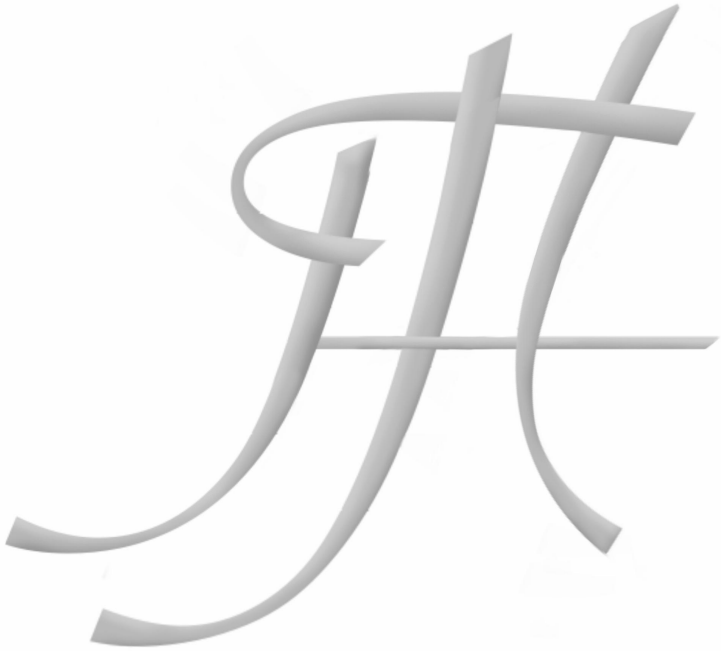


*Freedom
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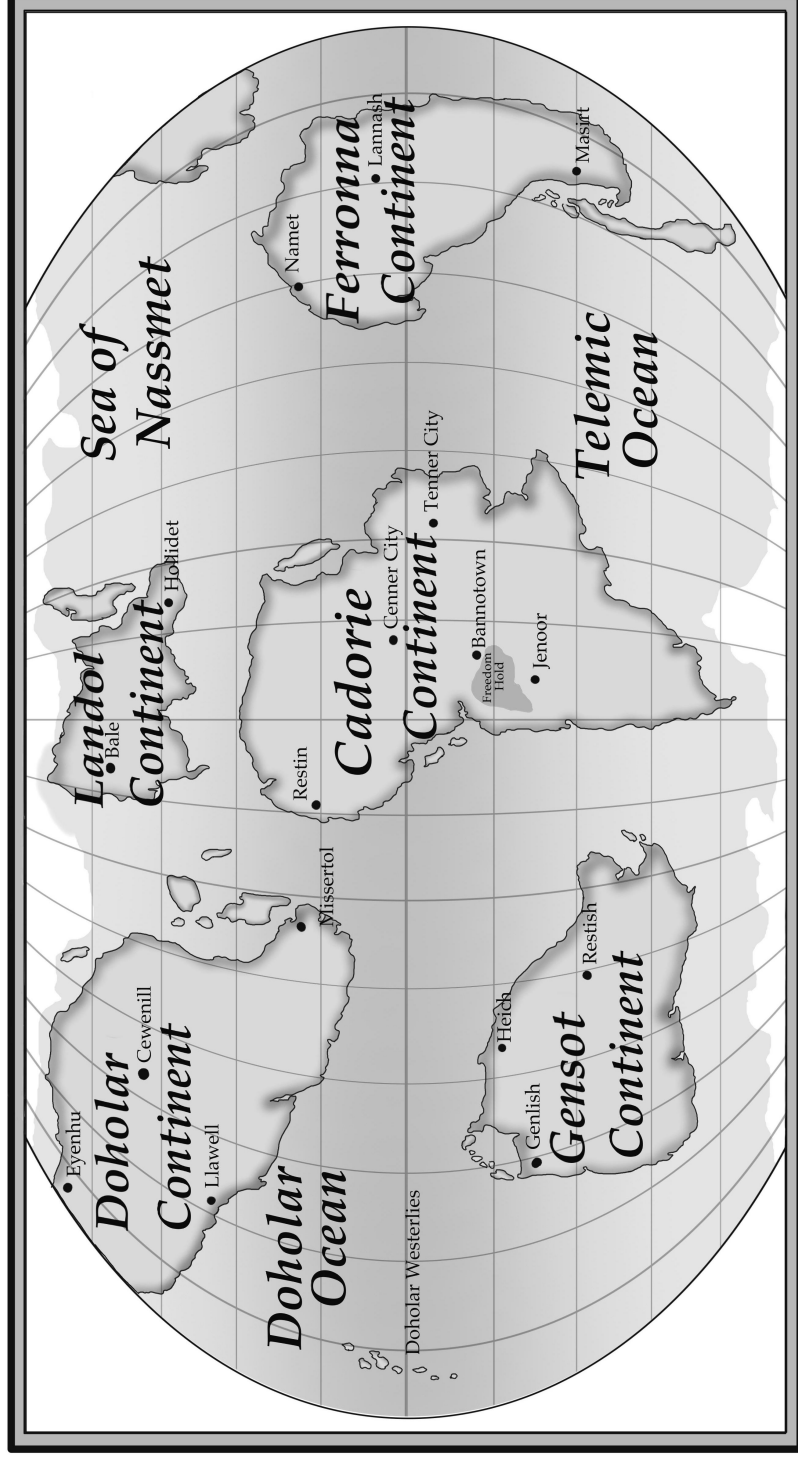
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Hocalie World Map



Central Cadorie Continent

Prologue

Hocalie is an agrarian world with five continents and peaceful, law-abiding citizens. They have advanced scientific knowledge and technology but prefer to live in harmony with nature.

Since their world lacks useable hydrocarbon deposits, they never developed engines that could deliver enough thrust to sustain flight. They have wind, hydro, and solar power and sophisticated electronics.

One hundred and twenty years ago, Langons landed in an isolated valley on Cadorie Continent. They built a mine and foundry to manufacture components for an orbiting shipyard. Since this was a private venture funded by Galactic Mining and Exploration, the Langon government didn't interfere. That left the management free to do whatever they wanted with little regard for the land or the indigenous population.

Now, the Langons have a stranglehold on the world government. They have mines on two other continents and have enslaved the workforce.

Shortly after the aliens first landed, Kefan Bennet, his wife Lenea, and her brother Lannes discovered the invasion. Unable to make the aliens leave, they did their best to protect as much of their world as possible.

Kefan was both an electronics genius and a successful singing star. He used the money he made to purchase a huge tract of land, an alien-free zone known as Freedom Hold.



Chapter 1

Down below, Kaylee's family slept inside the house in soft beds, but she preferred to be on her bed of branches high in the canopy of the lesern tree, one with the sky and the moons. She snuggled under thick covers as warmth enveloped her body.

Stars sparkled between drifting clouds while gentle gusts of cool, moist air rustled the few remaining leaves. Lightning danced across the distant horizon, glinting off a Langon space shuttle heading in for a landing.

The rumbling of the ore processors vied with distant thunder to keep sleep at bay. Someday, she would find a place where silence filled the nights. Someday, she would be free of Langon control, free to make her own decisions, free to choose her own husband. Someday.

A brisk wind tugged a bank of dark clouds across the sky, obliterating both moons and all the stars. The astronomy books said a glittering band crossed the night sky sparkling with billions of stars, but she had never seen it. The mine poured dust into the air blotting out all but the brightest stars. Kaylee closed her eyes, imagining a sky like the pictures in the book. She intended to see that sky - someday.

Lightning flashed, thunder cracked, and hail pelted her face. She moaned, pulling the covers over her head. The hail morphed into great drops of rain, soaking the blankets. By the time she climbed down from the tree, rain dropped in steady sheets. Kaylee bent her shoulders against the deluge, trudging to the shelter of the porch. Water dripped from her nightdress, forming a puddle as she inched the door open. She should have put a rain tarp up, but she wanted to see the stars.

Inside, she tiptoed up the stairs, leaving a trail of wet footprints and drips. After a good shake, she brushed the worst of the water from her orange fur and slipped between the sheets, wet and naked. In a moment, her body relaxed into the sleep's oblivion.

Kaylee's eyes opened to bright morning light streaming through the curtains. The world outside glittered in the morning sun. Rain had washed away the early fall snow, but it would not last. Tomorrow would bring freezing weather and more snow.

She went downstairs, where her mother, sister, and brother sat at the table, waiting for her father to come down.

"You got wet last night," her mother, Maydes, scolded. She wore a simple gray tunic that complimented her deep mahogany fur. The long fur on the top of her head showed light streaks of silver where it fell over her little round ears. Her gold eyes drooped as if she had been tired for too long.

"Yes, Mama." Kaylee spooned ganors porridge into a bowl, sat at the table, and waited. The morning cold chilled her still damp fur. Every day started the same way, the same food, the same bowls, and the same chair.

After a few minutes, her father, Calfer, plodded downstairs, filled a bowl with porridge, and sat at the head of the table. Tangles matted his pale yellow fur. His green eyes glared as he pointed to the muddy footprints on the worn, wood floor.

Calfer built fires in the winter when snow shrouded the ground, but not today. The family was allotted just enough wood to stop the house from freezing. Langan buildings were toasty warm all year. At least the farm's solar water heaters provided warm water on sunny days.

Her little sister, Yomne, practiced counting. "One." She stuck out her thumb. "Two, three, four." She held up her three fingers. Holding up the other hand, she counted to eight.

Her fifteen-year-old brother, Jessery, prattled on about his girlfriend. His pale, yellow fur shone as if he had spent all morning brushing it.

Kaylee had a boyfriend when she was fifteen, but that was two years ago before the Langons told her to marry Ralaf.

Jessery should know better. Langons never paired Cadorie who liked each other.

Kaylee's parents' spooned porridge into their mouths, never saying a word, not even looking at each other.

Were they in love? She had never thought about her parents' marriage until she got her list. It had three names on it, but only Ralaf was available. "May I be excused, Mama?"

"Go back up that tree and get the bedding. It needs to dry before it molds."

"Yes, Mama."

"Wash your nightdress, clean the floor where you tracked in mud, and do the dishes."

"Yes, Mama."

"Today, you have lunch with Ralaf. You should wear a pretty dress. His parents will be there. You want to make a good impression and be nice to him."

"Yes, Mama. May I take care of the bedding now?"

Maydes nodded.

Kaylee shuffled outside, where fluffy white clouds floated in a cerulean sky. After spreading the rain tarp over the wet ground, she grabbed the first branch and scurried up to her bed. Intertwining branches formed a flat platform in the middle of the tree. It even had sides to prevent falling off.

Long ago, when she was seven, and it was summer, Kaylee had tied three branches together so she could lie in the cool breeze of the tree canopy. She continued to weave branches into her bed until she could sleep safely.

The tree rose almost as high as the roof. On clear days, Kaylee could see neighboring farmhouses and distant cliffs. Today, smoke from the smelter obscured the view. Groaning and clanking, the noise of moving and crushing rocks bounced off the valley's vertical rock walls.

She was almost seventeen, almost married. She sat in the middle of the bed surveying her world, vowing to sleep in her tree every night until her wedding. Afterward, she would sleep with Ralaf, inside, always, for the rest of her life. Her heart filled with emptiness.

She dropped the bedding to the ground and then hung it under the porch. After that, she collected and washed the breakfast dishes and wiped the mud off the floor. When she was younger, the chores took her away from playing. Now, they filled up empty time.

Back in her room, she curled her fingers over the gold-colored chain around her neck, and pulled and twisted until her hands hurt, but never hard enough to break it. There were things worse than a life with Ralaf.

An old lady once told her chains used to be real gold, and each family had their own pattern of flowers, leaves, and even colored stones. But Langons provided the chains now. Kaylee's had Ralaf's initials. His had her initials.

She stomped her foot, flopped on the bed, and opened her science book. Books filled the shelves her father had built, her precious books. She even had three fiction books, but most were science and math. Every birthday gift, or bit of money, went to buy books. At least she could take her books with her. Ralaf never read books. If he wanted to sleep with her, he would have to make some concessions. She would have as many books as she wanted, or Ralaf could sleep on the floor.

"Kaylee, are you ready?" her mother shouted from the living room.

Kaylee stared at the science book, unable to focus on the words. Her fur stood up at the thought of Ralaf's touch. There had to be some way to get free.

Maydes stomped up the stairs. "Are you ready?" She opened the door. "What if Ralaf sees you dressed in dirty work clothes?"

Her mother rummaged through the wardrobe and threw a blue dress at Kaylee. "Wear this. I will be back in ten minutes. I expect you to be ready." She reached for the doorknob. "And brush yourself. You look a mess."

"Yes, Mama." Kaylee brushed her fur and slipped into the dress, a blue sleeveless jumper with a pleated skirt that fell just above her knees. The rounded neckline highlighted her chain.

All right, Mama, here I am dressed for a summer afternoon, but I have to walk through the mud to the barn and ride three miles in the fall wind. The clouds are getting thicker. We will get wet before we get there. She smiled. Mama would be wet too.

Maydes waited at the foot of the stairs. A yellow ribbon tied back the long fur on top of her head. "Put your good shoes in this bag and wear your boots. You can change when we get there. Better bring a coat. I have our rain ponchos. Hurry now."

Calfer walked up with Yomne and Jessery in tow. "Be nice to Ralaf. He likes you a lot."

Her father used to play his flute and sing every night when they had a warm fire, but not anymore. After he finished the farm work, he just stared out the window. Mama used to sing all the time too. Now she only cared about getting Kaylee married.

In the barn, Kaylee ran her fingers through their old cefyll, Gessel's, curly fur. Mud squeezed up between Gessel's toes, and she shook her floppy ears as if she might have an infection.

Her mother rode Salie, the big, brown and white gelding. Salie could pull the plow all day without getting tired. Gessel was only good for short trips.

Maydes and Kaylee rode in silence. Sheer cliffs, carved by a long-ago glacier, loomed to the north and south, making the valley resemble a natural prison. To the east, the Kenned River flowed over a two-thousand-foot cliff into the Fana Valley, where glaciers had intersected eons ago. To the west, the valley ended in a glacial cirque, another vertical rock wall.

Maybe, somewhere on the other side of the cliffs, the world was different, and Cadorie did whatever they wanted.

Kaylee ventured conversation. "How come I only had three boys to choose from? Why not more?"

"Because that is the way it is," her mother replied.

"Did you have three boys to choose from?"

Maydes closed her gold eyes for a moment. "No, I had two, and one refused me."

"Did Dadda have a choice? Did he choose you, or was he also forced to marry you?"

"Oh honey, no one forced us."

Kaylee gripped the reins as hard as she could, dreading the answer to her next question. "What if you had refused to get married? What would have happened?"

Her mother pulled up on the reins. "If you refuse, you lose everything. You lose your land, your job, your healthcare, everything. Both of you will work in the mines or as servants. You can love Ralaf, or you can live alone in poverty."

Kaylee kept her voice quiet. "I want to choose for myself."

Maydes snapped the reins, and the cefylls trotted forward. "All the other boys are spoken for. Who would you choose?"

Eldin liked to read and talk about science, but he was not on her list. She could still see him at school, but even that would end soon.

Once she married Ralaf, they would be moved into an apartment near the mine. He would work in the food warehouse, and she would teach young children reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Long ago, she discovered the advanced math teaching programs for Langons. No one stopped her, so she read the books and did the exercises. When she asked for help, the teachers told her Cadorie could not understand complicated math, so she figured it out for herself.



Chapter 2

Before Ralaf headed home after school, he snuck around the back of the administration building. There he walked inside as if he belonged. A blast of warm air ruffled his fur. Langons always kept their buildings warm. He casually strolled by the new security officer's door. It was closed.

He dared not wait. Varak got angry if he found Cadorie loitering in the halls, so Ralaf walked around the corner to wait and listen. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes he got hit, but today it was worth the risk.

He fingered the chain he wore, Kaylee's chain. He had turned seventeen two months ago, but he still had two more months to wait until Kaylee turned seventeen and the school year ended. Then they would marry, and she would be his. He wanted that more than anything in the world.

The Minister of Family Planning evaluated all sixteen-year-old Cadorie and selected mates. Three boys and three girls were put into a room and told to choose partners. When Ralaf saw Kaylee, he grabbed the other two boys into a huddle and bribed them to stay away from Kaylee. She never said a word, just stood in the corner wringing her hands and staring at the floor. The others talked and talked, but he stood beside Kaylee, the most beautiful girl in the world. Soon, she would be his wife. They would have their own apartment, and she would be his, all his, every night.

Footsteps came and went, shuffling, pounding, plodding. Ralaf ignored them. He was just about to give up when Varak's precise gait marched down the hall. Ralaf waited until he heard the door open and then strolled around the corner.

Ralaf looked up, way up into the dark eyes and furless face. "Good afternoon, Mr. Varak." He dipped his head and gave a brief smile. "Can I do anything for you today?"

Varak snorted. "Get lost."

Ralaf scowled and then focused on keeping his face neutral. "Thank you, sir. I am sorry to have bothered you." Sometimes it took Varak a few minutes to think of a job for him to do. Ralaf again dipped his head and slowly backed away.

"Wait. You can polish the floor."

Ralaf gritted his teeth and held out his hand. Varak never paid after a job was done. He hoped Varak would give him enough money; otherwise, he was committed to doing a lot of work for nothing. Plus, he would miss dinner at home and have to eat cold leftovers.

Varak put a coin in his hand. He dare not look at it. Varak hated greedy 'dori,' as he called all Cadorie. Ralaf smiled, stuffed the coin in his pocket, and opened the cupboard full of cleaning supplies.

An hour and a half later, he collected his wagon from the school grounds and purchased a load of wood. Varak had been generous; he even had enough money left over to buy a loryfowl for tomorrow's lunch. Both the warm fire and the meat should impress Kaylee.



Chapter 3

Kaylee and Maydes rode up to Ralaf's house a little past noon.

His father came out to greet them. "Welcome. Hot lunch is waiting." Dark oil streaked his golden fur.

Ralaf's mother stuck her head out of the door. Her black fur sparkled in the sun. Ribbons arranged to look like flowers tied back the long fur on top of her head. A big red bow sat on top of each little round ear. "Come in. Maydes, you sit by me. Kaylee, sit over here next to Ralaf."

While they ate, Ralaf discussed the farm and ore refinery with his father. The women talked about baking, canning, and other household duties.

Ralaf's mother pushed her plate away. "There is no way to get ahead. If our crops are good, our allowance is increased, but so is our rent."

Maydes shook her head. "If the crops fail, the allowance is cut, but the rent stays the same. It gets hard to buy enough seeds and supplies for next year." She stacked empty dishes on top of each other. "We could feed ourselves if we were permitted to have larger gardens."

Kaylee's stomach complained with each bite. When she and Ralaf married, they would be forced to live in an apartment with no garden. The best food came from the garden. How could she live on food from the store?

Ralaf's father left to tend the animals, and the two women went into the kitchen, leaving Kaylee alone with Ralaf. His brown fur sparkled in the flickering firelight.

His parents must be trying to impress her or her mother. A fire during the day was an extravagant waste of wood this time of year.

Ralaf's gold eyes narrowed, and his mouth set in a line. "Come over here and sit next to me."

Kaylee cringed at the request. She sat halfway between him and the end of the couch. How could she live with someone like him? He only wanted to please the Langons, even when they hurt Cadorie.

He scooted closer, pushing her against the armrest and putting his grubby hand on hers. She flinched, and he put his hand on the back of her head.

She leaned back, searching for an escape route, but Ralaf bent over, preventing her from standing. She held back a scream, grabbing her skirt to keep her hands still. If he touched her again, she might vomit.

Ralaf put his lips on hers.

The breath exploded out of her. "No!" She leapt up so fast she smacked his face with her shoulder.

Ralaf jumped back, rubbing his nose. "What did you do that for? I get to touch you."

"No." She backed to the wall. "Stop." Her fur stood on end, and her stomach recoiled at the feel of his lips.

"I get to kiss you. I get to sleep with you." He put his hands on her shoulders. "I get to have sex with you."

He pressed his lips against hers. Kaylee held her body rigid, gagging at the taste of him.

Ralaf stepped back. His brown fur frizzed out, his eyes mere slits. "You should kiss me back."

Kaylee wiped her mouth. "Sorry, no." She swallowed to keep lunch down.

He put his hand on her shoulder, and she reached for his chain.

He jumped back. "No, stop," he shouted. "Break my chain, and I will spend the rest of my life in the mines." He sighed. "Neither of us can pick again. We have to have children, or they will punish both of us."

Kaylee hung her head. He was correct. So was her mother. "If we argue, our parents will hear, and we will both be in trouble."

"Your fur is so pretty, reddish-gold, and curly. Do you even like me?" Ralaf reached his hand toward her.

She looked away, blinking back tears. Ralaf was her future husband, the man she would live with forever. "I want to go home."

"We can watch the vid." Ralaf twisted a knob on a rectangular box sitting on legs. The screen lit up.

Kaylee wrapped her arms around herself and perched on the edge of the couch. Ralaf settled into a chair, so she relaxed and scooted back onto the seat.

A thin, fair Cadorie sang while a band played behind him. His clear, light eyes sparkled and highlighted his pale facial fur. His old-fashioned robes billowed and flowed. Although the vid lacked color, she imagined the robes to be deep purple and shimmering pale blue with gold highlights. No one could buy anything like that, now.

His voice soared, strong and clear as if caressing the melody. "I like this song," Kaylee said. Her family did not have a vid. They had her father's flute and her mother's singing.

Ralaf nodded. "The Langons will shut it down in a minute. Traitors do this sometimes."

A moment later, the song ended. "That was the original recording of Cadorie Dreams by Kefan Bennet," the announcer said. "This is the one-hundred and

twenty-third anniversary of the invasion of Cadorie Continent by Langons." Static filled the screen for a second or two. "Kefan Bennet, his wife Lenea, and brother-in-law, Lannes Mifor were the first Cadorie, the first people on Hocalie, to discover the Langon incursion into the Kenned Valley." Pictures of people in old-fashioned clothing flashed on the screen. Music swelled from the speakers. "Kefan's singing career funded the establishment Freedom Hold, the Langon exclusion zone south of Bannotown." A burst of static interrupted the vid.

Kaylee's mouth opened. Somewhere Cadorie really did live free of Langons.

Ralaf put his hands on his ears. "I hate the static. The technicians will get that shut down in no time."

After the spate of grating and buzzing, the screen showed a picture of a young man with curly fur and no feet being wheeled to a microphone on an outdoor stage. "Langons kidnapped Lannes Mifor for spreading anti-Langon ideologies. He was injured while escaping. Later, he freed the rest of the prisoners, which led to the rebellion of 4722. He, Lenea, and Kefan are heroes and visionaries. They formed the League of Free Cadorie."

Kaylee's heart went out to the injured man being treated as a hero. If he lived here, he would be forced to crawl on the ground and work in the mine until he died.

The screen turned black and filled with static for a moment, and then the program resumed. "In 4744, Freedom Hold was declared a separate nation. Today it is free, proud, and—"

The screen went blank. A Langon wearing a GM&E uniform came on. His elongate, furless face filled the screen. He had long pointed ears, a forehead extending up to the middle of his scalp, and straight dark fur in a ring around the back of his head. His deep voice resonated through the room. "We apologize for the interruption by those traitors and liars. We will now resume our program on the history of the Jaskem Settlement and the Hocalie Shipyards." He smiled, showing extra-wide teeth. At least it was just a vid image, and she couldn't smell the pungent odor that followed each Langon.

Ralaf settled down into his chair.

Kaylee leaned back. Could it be real? The Langons would never have broadcast that. Someone must have done it illegally.

The Langon face continued to be displayed in the corner while a picture of the shipyards in geosynchronous orbit filled the screen. "This is but a small part of the technology and prosperity the Langons have bestowed on the people of Hocalie. We have built towns, provided employment, and improved the general life of every Cadorie on this continent as we have on Hocalie's other four continents. Today we will tour the shipbuilding facilities and show how the Cadorie, the people of this continent, have been elevated from simple farmers to builders of spaceships."

She wished her father could have heard the tune, but her mind raced with the idea that somewhere, people lived free. Maybe she could find that place.

Ralaf had dismissed the vid and called those people traitors. Every Langon would say that. She narrowed her eyes and watched him concentrate on the vid about the shipyards. Did he care more for Langons than for his own freedom? "Does the League of Free Cadorie vid come on often?"

Ralaf hunched forward toward the vid. "Not often."

"Do you think the Langons have improved our lives?" Kaylee asked.

"Of course," Ralaf replied. "We have jobs and food, as long as we stay out of trouble." He ran his finger along the chain around his neck.

If the League of Free Cadorie were real, she had no way to contact them. She closed her eyes, dreaming of a better life, and almost missed it.

A small black strip appeared across the bottom of the screen. "Contact the League of Free Cadorie at 56-890-34 or Postal Drop 67d5 Bannotown."

Kaylee's skin tingled all over. She should have kept her eyes open. Static replaced the numbers so fast she could not remember them all.

"We are having technical difficulties," a different Langon voice said.

Ralaf tried the other channels. They all displayed their normal static.

Kaylee repeated the numbers in her head. She had to remember them. "What did they mean about the Langons invading Cadorie? I thought we asked them to come help us."

Ralaf fiddled with the knobs. "The vid's on the fritz."

"Do you remember those numbers?"

"What numbers?"

"It was 56-8 something 34?"

"What are you talking about?" Ralaf asked.

Her heart raced. "I need paper before I forget."

Ralaf pointed to a small desk in the corner. On a scrap of paper, Kaylee wrote 568 _ _ 34 67d5. "I remember the 67d5." She wrote Bannotown on the paper.

"Ralaf, do you remember the middle numbers?"

He shook his head. "What numbers?"

"The numbers at the bottom of the screen. You must have seen them." How could he miss them?

"I want to see the shipyards."

"Do you know what the League of Free Cadorie is? Or Freedom Hold?"

Both mothers stepped out of the kitchen. "Where did you hear about those?" Ralaf's mother asked.

"On the vid, but the Langons cut in, and everything went off."

"It was just the same old lies." Ralaf fiddled with the vid knobs.

"The Langons punish anyone who is associated with them. How come you never warned her, Maydes?" Ralaf's mother asked

"It never came up."

Kaylee wadded up the paper and stuffed it into her pocket.